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ABSTRACT

Problems in higher education were identified by a study group in a year-long study funded by the National Institute of Education. Problem areas included: college student attrition, declining test scores of graduate school applicants, an increasingly impersonal atmosphere on campuses and less involvement of students with academic life, deteriorating buildings and equipment, and inflation that has outpaced faculty salaries. To achieve excellence in higher education, the study group advocated involving students in school, setting high and clear expectations, and providing regular assessment and feedback to students. Specific recommendations for these goals are offered, including: devoting more time to freshmen and sophomores; using a variety of teaching styles (not just lectures) and requiring that students take greater responsibility for their learning; making sure the curriculum matches specific graduation requirements; requiring at least 2 years of liberal arts courses for a bachelor's degree; requiring students to pass proficiency exams; developing a comprehensive assessment program, including essays, interviews, portfolios, and tests; and involving faculty in designing assessment methods. (SW)

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Trouble Spots In Higher Education

Only about half of the students who enter America's colleges with the intention of receiving a bachelor's degree actually graduate.

Test scores of college graduates applying to graduate schools have declined, some by very substantial amounts.

Colleges have become more bureaucratic and impersonal, resulting in fewer opportunities for students to become intensely involved with academic life.

Buildings and equipment at colleges have deteriorated.

Faculty salaries have not kept up with inflation.

These are some of the problems a seven-member study group found as it examined the condition of higher education in America's colleges and universities. The year-long study was funded by the National Institute of Education (NIE), the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education.

Although many recent reports have focused attention on elementary and secondary schools, this is the first time in 15 years a federally funded study has put the spotlight on postsecondary institutions.

The study group concluded that to achieve excellence in higher education, America's colleges and universities must:

1) Get students more involved with school;
2) Set high and clear expectations;
3) Provide regular assessment and feedback to students.

It is not surprising that research shows that the more time and effort students invest in learning, the more they will learn. Highly involved students demonstrate their commitment in a number of ways: by devoting considerable energy to studying, by working on campus rather than off, by being active in student organizations, and by working closely with faculty and fellow students on academic projects.

The study group recommended that colleges involve students by:

-- spending more time working with and helping freshmen and sophomores, years when students seem the most vulnerable;

-- using a variety of teaching styles (rather than relying solely on lectures) and requiring that students take greater responsibility for their learning;

-- maintaining personal contact between students and faculty, especially as new technologies, such as computers, are used in teaching;

-- involving faculty and administrators in effective and 'real' advisement programs;

-- providing money, space and recognition for student activities which increase student involvement, i.e., debate teams.

When educators expect too much, student learning suffers. By the same token, when they expect little of their students, that's what they get. In order to set high expectations for students the study group recommended that colleges:

-- set specific goals students must meet before graduating and

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let students know right from the start what is expected of them;

-- make sure the curriculum matches these goals;

-- require at least two years of liberal arts courses for a bachelor's degree, even if it means extending undergraduate programs in professional fields to five years;

-- require students to pass proficiency exams, both in their major and basic liberal education courses, as well as earn credits in order to graduate;

-- set requirements in remedial courses which will enable students to perform well in their regular college level courses.

One of the most serious trouble spots in higher education, according to the study group, is the failure of colleges and universities to test their students' knowledge. For example, a 1978 survey of 208 institutions showed that only 23 percent had tested students' knowledge of their majors. The study group recommended that colleges provide regular testing and feedback to students by:

-- developing a comprehensive assessment program, including essays, interviews, portfolios, and tests, to see what works and what doesn't work;

-- making sure that assessments accurately test what is being taught;

-- actively involving the faculty in designing new methods of assessment;

--giving more weight to teaching ability and effectiveness in determining tenure, promotions, hiring and retention;

-- conducting regular student evaluations of academic programs.

The Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education was chaired by Kenneth Mortimer of Pennsylvania State University.

Copies of its final report, 'Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education,' (Stock No. 065-000-00213-2) are available for $4.50 each from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Research in Brief contacts: Laurie Maxwell/Kay McKinney, National Institute of Education, 1200 19th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20208. Telephone: 202/254-7900.

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